

Witness Statement of: Eman Hijazi

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits:

Date of statement: 5 June 2018

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF EMAN HIJAZI

I, EMAN HIJAZI, will say as follows:-

1. This statement is my account of events that took place on 14th June 2017. This statement is for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I wish to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I am a Core Participant to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. My date of birth is [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I make this statement to be used as evidence at the Inquiry.
3. I remember the exact day I moved to this flat in the [REDACTED] numbers of Testerton Walk, it was 5th November 1997. I have lived here for over 20 years. It is a very nice area and the best thing about it is the community itself. The people here are very nice and it is a friendly environment.
4. I am a housewife. I live with my husband, Mahmoud Badr, my daughter, Susan Al-Safadi and my [REDACTED] year old son, [REDACTED]

14th June

5. The fire happened during Ramadan. Usually during Ramadan people don't sleep during the night, however because this was a school night and we work, so we usually go to bed at about 11pm and then wake up at about 1.30am or 2am to have our meal. The night before was a Tuesday night, so we went to bed as usual at about 11pm.
6. I remember Susan came knocking at our door to wake us up. I remember checking the time on the clock and seeing that it was 1.30am, so thinking that she was waking us up too early and there was still a half hour to go because we usually had our meal at about 2am. She was saying 'did you hear the noise?' I said yes that I heard the noise but that it was too early for our meal. I could hear some people screaming outside and asking for help and I could hear the Fire Brigade sirens. Susan insisted that she was going to go upstairs onto the balcony to check out what was happening. I said to her that you are not going upstairs. About two years previously, there had been people fighting and shooting each other so I thought it was a similar incident to that. Susan said that she must go.
7. In the middle of our conversation, my husband got a telephone call from his nephew. I saw this and thought that something must be wrong, because he would not usually phone us at that time. I could hear my husband speaking to him and saying "what are you saying?" My husband then turned to me and said "the Tower is on fire". I remember asking "which Tower?" My sister-in-law lives in a Tower block close by too; there are about three or four Tower blocks in the area. My husband told me it was Grenfell Tower and that his nephew told him that "the fire was from the bottom to the end". I had just thought that it was a small fire.
8. Susan and my husband went upstairs to go and look on the balcony. Our balcony looks out onto the green between Testerton Walk and Barandon Walk. If you look left when you are on the balcony you can see Grenfell Tower; if you look to the right, then you can see some of Whitchurch Road. Grenfell Tower is close to our flat – about 45 metres or so. I waited downstairs as I thought they would only be five minutes and then come back downstairs. My son [REDACTED] was asleep downstairs so I did not want to leave him downstairs in case he woke up and couldn't find anyone. I was waiting for my husband and Susan to come back but they didn't come.

9. About five or ten minutes later, I opened my bedroom window. This window opens up underneath our balcony and looks out onto the same green between Testerton Walk and Barandon Walk. I could hear Susan and my husband speaking in Arabic. They were saying “oh my god, what is this. God bless the people”. My husband was [REDACTED] asking for the people to be safe. When I heard what they were saying, I called out to them. No one answered me so I decided that I must go upstairs. I could not see Grenfell Tower from looking outside my bedroom window.
10. I went upstairs to join my husband and Susan on the balcony about ten or fifteen minutes after they had gone. I could see a small flame in the top corner of the Tower. I felt worried at this time.
11. My husband was filming it. I could see people in the windows and when they saw the light in his camera, they were shouting and screaming at us, saying “help us!” I could not see people’s faces but I could see people standing in the windows.
12. Later on, I could not believe what I saw. There was fire everywhere, absolutely everywhere. I could see people standing in the windows and you could see the fire behind them in their flats. I would say the fire was going up to about the fourteenth floor. You could see the fire inside the building. It was mostly on the right hand side as we looked onto it from our balcony. My feeling of worry had turned into terror.
13. There was smoke everywhere. There was a helicopter in the sky.
14. The fire seemed to be coming from the outside and going inside towards the flats. It was like it was coming from the sides and then going in through the windows.
15. I could see material melting and flying down. It was pieces of stuff – I don’t know what it was, maybe cladding. Some of them were small pieces and some were very big, like 2 metres by 0.5 metres.

16. I saw people trying to jump. Other people were screaming 'help us'. People were taking torches – I think they were the lights on their mobile phones – and were waving them for us to see them.
17. I saw a man putting sheets together in an attempt to climb out. People down below were trying to stop him, they were saying "stop!" I am not sure whether those people were officials or not. I thought that he was going to throw the sheets out; I thought he was going to jump. I was really panicking and shaking, so I sat down on a chair outside. I could not even look.
18. We were on the balcony for about 45 minutes. In some flats there was no fire and then during the time we were out on the balcony, after about 30 minutes, we saw the fire going into the flat. During the time we were on the balcony, the fire moved up from the 14th or 15th floor to about the 17th floor.
19. From my balcony you cannot see underneath the Tower so I could not see any fire engines near the Tower, but I could see some on Whitechurch Road when I turned to the right from the balcony. I could certainly hear lots of sirens.
20. We could still hear lots of screaming and lots of sirens. There were lots of people running around outside. I heard my neighbours downstairs screaming. Whilst outside on the balcony, my friend's daughter called Susan to make sure we were ok. I also received a call from her mother. I told her mother 'we are outside on the balcony'. She said 'what are you still doing there?' They live nearby, in Ladbroke Grove. She told me that they had evacuated people from the walkways. She told me specifically that our neighbour, who is her friend, had been asked to leave. As soon as we heard that, we thought that it must be dangerous so we all decided to go downstairs.
21. We woke [REDACTED] up at this point. My husband needed to travel within 10 days, so we grabbed his passport and tickets.

22. As we opened our front door, everyone was up and about. I remember two girls who live in the 300s in Testerton Walk were on their way upstairs to warn us. I knocked on our neighbours' doors on our level to try to wake them.
23. We went outside. We used the ramp down from Testerton Walk that leads onto Whitchurch Road. We found everyone else outside, all the neighbours. Even the people who live in the 300s – who usually use a different exit to us, so I don't know them as well – were all outside. People were visibly panicking.
24. I saw lots of fire engines from the beginning to the end of Whitchurch Road. There were fire fighters in groups, walking and running from Whitchurch Road to the Tower and back again. The fire fighters were ignoring people when people were asking them things. I felt there were hundreds of them going from Whitchurch Road towards the station and then coming back in the same way. This was a big thing for me – I did not understand why they were there and weren't at the Tower helping.
25. By that time, smoke had started to come from the Tower and over Testerton Walk. The smoke was coming towards us. You could smell it and see it. Most people were speaking about the Tower collapsing – this made us more worried. If it collapsed, it might come towards us.
26. It was about 2am by the time we arrived downstairs. We sat down on one of the metal benches, which are situated at the end of the ramp from Testerton Walk. [REDACTED] was asleep; my husband was carrying him.
27. Some people around us were really panicking. I remember a Brazilian lady, whose husband was in the mosque. She had not charged her phone and wanted to tell her husband that she was safe as she had had to come downstairs with the two children. We had a power pack with us that charges phones so we let her borrow this and tried to calm her down. We were reassuring her.
28. The fire was getting worse, and bigger and bigger. It was still going inwards from the outside into the windows like it was before. We could not actually see the Tower from

the bench that we were sitting on, but it was reflected in all the windows of Hurstway Walk. We could see the fire in the reflection getting bigger and bigger. Even in the time it took us to leave the balcony and go downstairs, the fire had now moved to the top floor of the tower. We could see in the reflection that it was absolutely getting bigger and bigger.

29. I can't remember if I could see how far the fire was going around the building. I just remember lots of black smoke and fire going up to the very top.
30. We could still see the pieces of material melting and flying down. It was getting worse and worse. The pieces of material were in flames; I remember thinking that if those pieces fell to the ground that I was worried the grass would catch alight and would make things worse.
31. When we were downstairs, my sister-in-law called us. She told us that we were in a bad situation and she wanted to make sure we were ok. I asked her where she was. She lives very nearby, [REDACTED]. She said that she had tried to go towards the Tower but the police had stopped her going further. She had taken a few blankets and wanted to try and help rescue people. She said that she had seen people jumping from the window. This made me more frightened – I realised then that it was not going to be ok.
32. I could not hear people screaming or shouting anymore from the Tower by the time we were outside. I could only hear the people around us. I could not see anyone inside the Tower from where we were sitting on the bench. I knew that people were inside though. I thought that they couldn't breathe because of the smoke; I thought they had fainted and so I knew that obviously the fire would burn them.
33. People around us were speaking to people inside the Tower. A neighbour nearby to us was talking to a girl inside the Tower. This girl used to live on the 22nd floor; she was the oldest daughter in the Choucair family. I knew the mother in the Choucair family, Nadia. Nadia was [REDACTED]'s Teaching Assistant at school. The neighbour kept on speaking to the girl in the Choucair family who was inside the Tower. She was telling

us what the girl had said. In the first call, our neighbour told us she had said, “in the beginning, the police stopped us. They asked us to stay in”. In the next call, she said “the police said to stay”. Apparently they had called them and asked them to stay put.

34. At about 4.30am, that neighbour came over to us. She was very depressed and crying. She said the girl had said that they can't make it. She had said to the neighbour, we love you all and please pray for us. That was the last call that our neighbour received from her.

35. Throughout the night, we were talking with our neighbours about who lived in the Tower and who was missing. I remember that the El-Wahabi family were mentioned. This was a Moroccan family that lived in the Tower. I knew the mother, Faouzia, quite well from seeing her around the estate. We would say 'hi' to each other if we saw each other around but not really stop and chat. The other name I recognised was Nura (I don't know her surname) whose son, Jacob, was friends with [REDACTED] and who we would often walk to school together with.

36. We were in touch with my sister-in-law throughout the night. She was standing opposite Latimer Road. She was telling us that they were taking bodies and putting them on the road. My husband went to Latimer Road at about 4.30am to meet his sister near the station. I stayed with [REDACTED] on the bench. He saw bodies too. He came back after about 1 hour.

37. Until about 4am or 5am, the police wouldn't stop you going back into the walkways. After that, they would not allow people to go back in.

38. We stayed outside until just before 7am. At about 6.30am, people started going to St Clement's Church as it had opened up. [REDACTED] was very frightened – particularly when he found out about Nadia. He had overheard people talking about Nadia living in the 22nd floor of the Tower and still being in there.

39. We started thinking, what are we going to do? The police had told us that we couldn't go back inside. People around me were talking about how they felt betrayed because

they had told residents in the Tower that it was safe to stay inside when it clearly was not. After the fire spread, they were going in and rescuing people from lower floors – but they should have let them try to escape. People were concerned about what would happen if the fire spread to where we were, we already felt that we had been betrayed. All the people were worried; they had lost trust in everything.

40. The fire was still going. Pieces of material were still falling down from the Tower.

41. I said to Susan that I was really tired and that I had to sit down in a warm place. We went to her car at about 6.30am. We stayed in the car for about 30 minutes, trying to reach a decision about what to do. Susan wanted to go to work. We got a call from my son in law at about 6.30am. My daughter Rawan and my son in law live in Bromley. They said that we had to go over there and rest a while and that they would take us back here afterwards. We decided that we would go there, as my husband used to work in Bromley also. So we decided that Susan would go to work and my husband would take [REDACTED] and me to Rawan's flat. [REDACTED] and we had not managed to rest the whole night so we said that we would go. We left the area. The way was blocked with lots of fire engines, but the Fire Brigade and police directed us where to go.

42. By that time, everyone was still calling us to make sure we were ok. The fire was all over the news by that point.

43. When we arrived at Rawan's flat, I managed to have about one hour's sleep. Our phones did not stop ringing. I was told that lots of people had died. I kept in touch with our neighbours that stayed in the area for updates. At about 10am, I phoned one of my neighbours. She said that the fire was still on. Throughout the day, I called [REDACTED]'s school to ask about the El-Wahabi family, Nadia and Nura, but they kept telling me they were all still missing. A neighbour told me that the police were letting people in if they needed medication. I called Susan during the day and asked her to go home and get her medication, and also get spare clothes for us to bring to Rawan's place.

44. Susan came to Rawan's. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] at 9.30pm and slept about two hours. I was still regularly speaking to neighbours who were telling me that people were still in the Church and in the road.

45. I spoke to a neighbour at 11am on the Thursday who told me that the fire had stopped but was now starting again. Because I had managed to have some sleep the night before, I was thinking 'what am I doing here'. I decided that I wanted to go back. We had left all of our belongings. I phoned up one neighbour who said that the police were not guarding the doors and some people had got back in. Rawan took me back home and when we arrived the police didn't stop us, they let us in. We have been living in the flat ever since the Thursday after the fire.

46. I wanted to know who was alive and who was missing. In the beginning, they said that 20 people had died – but I did not believe them. I have lived here for over 20 years. All the neighbours have been talking to each other – particularly when we were evacuated in the weeks after the fire, which was about four or five times. We have been counting all the people that were missing and knew it was more than they had said.

47. What scares us the most is that some people saw a body inside Testerton Walk. I have seen videos that were taken inside the Walkway. It was very frightening and very traumatising to see, because when you see the body you see that it is not burnt, it is just fine. This must mean that people died on the stairs from the smoke. This means that they could have saved people if they had let them leave at the right time. But because they left it so long, people died not from being burnt but from the smoke on the stairs.

Impact

48. I don't want to go into full detail at this stage about the impact that this has all had on me and my family. I am still suffering now. Everything in my daily routine reminds me of what happened – for example, the people who came to do refurbishments afterwards, the fire doors and curtains being changed, not having gas, the fire marshals who are around. These things do not help us forget what happened. Recently, the temporary communal boiler broke and there was what looked like

smoke, and people were really traumatised. People are traumatised. Lots of my neighbours are quite sure we will face the same things, that we will end up the same as the people who died in the Tower.

49. I have started counselling. It is difficult to forget what happened that night.

50. I had been coughing for months after the fire, which I think was from the smoke.

51. I knew people Nadia and the El-Wahabi family who lived in the Tower and died in the fire. I knew Fouzia well. Other than Nadia, I knew a Moroccan family, the El-Wahabi family, who lived in the Tower and died during the fire. I just knew them from living in the area. I knew the mother, Faouzia. I also knew Nura, who lived in the Tower and died during the fire. I do not know her surname but her son, Jacob, was [REDACTED]'s friend at school. Nura would walk half way to school with her children and then [REDACTED] and I would meet them and walk to school with them. We were not good friends, just friendly neighbours who would see each other every day. When I phoned the school, I would ask them if Nura had been found but they would tell me each time that she was still missing. I was hoping that they were in hospital or that someone had rescued them.

52. When these people didn't turn up after a few days, I realised that they had probably died. I would say 'hi' to them all if I saw them around, but that was it. We would not arrange to meet up with each other.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed: 

Dated: 5-6-2018

Eman Hijazi